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CONTENTS

"Una Piccola Nuvoletta": Ferrero's *Young Europe* and Joyce's Mature *Dubliners* Stories

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Except for a passing reference in his Trieste lecture, "Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages," Joyce's last mention of the historian and sociologist Guglielmo Ferrero was in a letter to Stanislaus of 11 February 1907: "Ferrero [gave me] *The Two Gallants*" (*Letters II* 212). Succinct, almost telegraphic, this is the sole explicit confession in Joyce's own hand of Ferrero's influence on his work. But Joyceans have not let the matter end there, and we now know a good bit about the Irishman's debt to his Italian contemporary. We know for instance that, beyond "giving" him "Two Gallants" (Joyce was not exaggerating), Ferrero was an early and significant contributor to the portrait of Leopold Bloom, which Joyce began building up in 1906.[1] But, as this essay will show, Ferrero's influence on *Dubliners* extended further than the *donnée* for the thirteenth story: *L'Europa giovane* also gave Joyce the title of "A Little Cloud," which David Weir calls "the most perplexing title of all the stories in *Dubliners*."[2] Moreover, it seems likely that Ferrero's book contributed to the mood and overall effect of "The Dead," especially the final section of the story. Most significant is the fact that, with Ferrero's assistance, Joyce's change of heart towards Ireland was registered first in "A Little Cloud" and later amplified and made official in "The Dead." "A Little Cloud" shows Joyce moving "from exposure to revelation of his countrymen" (*JJII* 196), even though the pre-established order of the *Dubliners* stories forced him to muffle this note of concession between "The Boarding House" and "Counterparts" (*Letters II* 131), stories of consummate "exposure." Ferrero played a more crucial role in Joyce's maturation as a writer than has been thought. A man for all of Joyce's seasons, he presided alike over the bitterness of "Two Gallants" and the compassion of the last two stories.

Let us review what Joyce's letters say about the composition of "A Little Cloud." Grant Richards' delay in responding to Joyce's submission in late 1905 of the first MS. of twelve stories gave Joyce the

opportunity to compose "Two Gallants," which he mentioned in a reminder to Richards of 27 January 1906 (*Letters II* 129). On 12 February, Joyce wrote again, having received no word yet from Richards: "I have added a story to *Dubliners* and would have added another, perhaps, had I not been in such incertitude about the fate of the first twelve" (*Letters II* 130). This mention of yet another story was the first sign of "A Little Cloud." Joyce's references to the still titleless story continue up to his receipt of Richards' fateful letter of 23 April.

Crushed by the printer's objections, Joyce replied immediately saying, "I intended to send you today the fourteenth and last story of the book, *A Little Cloud* which is now ready. I shall not do so, however, until I hear from you in reply" (*Letters I* 61). This was the first time since he had mentioned the story more than two months before that Joyce indicated its title. It was unusual for him to be so dilatory. Except with *Finnegans Wake* much later, he never held back a title but tended rather to give it as soon as it had occurred to him, by way of prospectus. For example, he informed Richards of the title of "Two Gallants" a month before he sent the story off; and in Rome, where he had little leisure to write, he produced a handful of titles only—"Ulysses," "The Last Supper," "The Dead," "The Street," and others (*Letters II* 209)—taking an almost bitter pleasure in listing possibilities he could not actualize.

But "A Little Cloud" was slow writing, what with Joyce's increased work load at the Berlitz School in Trieste and his move in late February to 1 via Giovanni Boccaccio. The title seems to have been the final addition to the story, and this detail he discovered while reading Ferrero's comparison between English and German socialism in *L'Europa giovane*. Ferrero devotes several pages to discussing the folly, as he sees it, of the Marxist attempt to predict the future on scientific principles. Suddenly, his analysis broadens into a meditation on man's place in life and history. "The great historical creations are unconscious," he says, "because man hasn't the intelligence to be able to determine beforehand the way of the future and must perforce venture into it blindly."[3] He pursues this notion, likening the course of human development to Columbus' accidental discovery of America and to the finding of gold in California, and concludes,

> Woe to man if he takes too seriously the calculations and designs that he has wrought for the future!... When man is convinced that he has in his pocket a topographical chart with the streets of the future marked out, he risks not finding them or finding them only after great exertion: it is better for the explorer not to make his plans too vast or too precise. What are the greatest conceptions of the human spirit before the infinite reality of life? A little cloud

[*una piccola nuvoletta*] against the unbounded expanse of the sky; a breath disperses it and no human eye will see it more. (114)

This passage is strikingly applicable to Little Chandler's predicament. He is full of dreamy plans for his future. He would like to flee Dublin and his "sober inartistic life," possibly for London where he might "write something original" (*D* 73) and be recognized as a poet. Towards the end of the story he again enters his artistic reverie while reading Byron's lines about hushed winds and the absence of zephyrs (a false lull before his cloudy hopes are scattered). Suddenly the reality of his domestic situation, focused in the sobbing of his child and the fury of Annie, blows his dreams away like the breath of wind in Ferrero's metaphor.[4]

But we must look more deeply here, for the original context of the title suggests more than the irony behind yet another Dublin failure. It urges us, in fact, to extend the irony of the clerk's situation to the success of the swaggering Gallaher, for it is Gallaher, even more than his diminutive friend, who thinks he possesses a map with the roads of his future—and Little Chandler's future, if he will heed the voice of experience—clearly indicated. As the journalist pours forth his knowledge of London, Paris and Berlin,[5] he practically unfolds such a map as the one in Ferrero's figure, and he does this "in a calm historian's tone," after emerging "from the clouds of smoke in which he had taken refuge" (*D* 78). These details may be ironic inversions and distortions of material in the Ferrero passage.[6]

The timid clerk and the brash journalist are both included in the title. Both are to be judged against the immense backdrop of reality and the history of men's aspirations. But the "nicely polished looking-glass" (*Letters I* 64) of "A Little Cloud" reflects more than these two faces, for the title implies that irony is present in all human endeavors. Joyce's source speaks in universal terms of the "greatest conceptions of the human spirit before the infinite reality of life" (114). Surely that category accommodates more than the unequal pair in Corless's.

This comprehensive pessimism suggests that Gabriel Conroy's realization of his commonality with "all the living and the dead" is already present in "A Little Cloud," and that by April 1906 Joyce had experienced the change of heart towards his countrymen that made exposure of their paralysis less interesting than revelation of their lives. Alerted to this, we sense a greater pathos in Little Chandler's thoughts as he gazes from his office window:

The glow of a late autumn sunset covered the grass plots and walks. It cast a

> shower of kindly golden dust on the untidy nurses and decrepit old men who drowsed on the benches; it flickered upon all the moving figures—on the children who ran screaming along the gravel paths and on everyone who passed through the gardens. He watched the scene and thought of life; and (as always happened when he thought of life) he became sad. (*D* 71)

This is a dress rehearsal for Gabriel's meditation as he watches from a different window the universal and universalizing descent, not of the golden dust[7] of a sunset, but of the snow of a winter morning.

Joyce's use of *L'Europa giovane* in "A Little Cloud" makes it virtually unnecessary to posit any other work of Ferrero's as the inspiration for "Two Gallants."[8] Up until now, the question has hinged on Joyce's remarks about Ferrero in his letter to Richards of 5 May 1906, remarks which Ellmann (*Letters II* 133, n.1), Brandabur, and Manganiello construe as referring to certain sections of *L'Europa giovane*. I will not repeat the analyses of Brandabur and Manganiello, who make their cases quite adequately, but I would like to clear up one matter. Joyce wrote to Richards in the 5 May 1906 letter:

> Is it the small gold coin . . . or the code of honour which the two gallants live by which shocks him? I see nothing which should shock him in either of these things. His idea of gallantry has grown up in him (probably) during the reading of the novels of the elder Dumas and during the performance of romantic plays which presented to him cavaliers and ladies in full dress. But I am sure he is willing to modify his fantastic views. I would strongly recommend to him the chapters wherein Ferrero examines the moral code of the soldier and (incidentally) of the gallant. But it would be useless for I am sure that in his heart of hearts he is a militarist. (*Letters II* 132-33)

The reference to gallantry and "the elder Dumas" is tangential on Joyce's part; Ferrero never made such a connection, so far as I can tell. It was Stanislaus who encouraged and amplified this misunderstanding in his B.B.C. broadcast in 1954.[9] Joyce's reference to Ferrero in this letter actually begins with the recommendation to the printer, and here he conflates two successive sections ("chapters," as he calls them) of *L'Europa giovane*. The first section is called "The Case of Oscar Wilde and Prostitution in Berlin," and in it Ferrero discusses the brutality of the German male towards the kept female and criticizes his total lack of patience "nelle cose della gallanteria" (167).[10] The next section, "Puritans and Esthetes," develops the speculation that one reason for the tensions between the Germanic and Latin races is the former's puritanical hatred of the sexual freedom of the latter. He suggests that Luther's attacks on the Church were prompted by such a hatred (169) and goes on to say that Bismarck too was

> a puritan, a blunt monogamist who knew nothing of the refinements of pleasure; as such he had no love for Paris, the city of the most elegant sensual pleasures.... [If], camped before Paris, he did not hesitate an instant to destroy the most beautiful city in Europe with Prussian cannons, perhaps this was at bottom nothing more than the vendetta of a puritan against a city that revelled in vices he was unable to enjoy. (169-70)

Joyce's point in his letter, obscured as it is by anger and vagueness, is that Richards' printer likewise is a puritan seeking to destroy sexual frankness, the frankness of the *Dubliners* stories. Joyce was telescoping here, as he had done in "Two Gallants," two issues which for our purposes should be kept separate: first, sexual brutality in the anonymous, mechanical liaisons in Berlin; and second, military conquest and destructiveness rooted in a puritanical abhorrence of sexual pleasure. It is the blending of these notions that makes for Corley's complex and subtly rendered rascality.

It is clear, then, that Joyce read enough of *L'Europa giovane* in late 1905 or early 1906 to get his *donnée* for "Two Gallants," and that he resorted to the book again, perhaps under pressure from Richards to meet the printer's deadline, for the title of "A Little Cloud" and probably for certain details in that story. The fact that Joyce did not mention the title until the story was completed suggests that he went back to Ferrero for clues at a late stage in the composition. Joyce's second extended reference to *L'Europa giovane* occurs in his Rome letter to Stanislaus of 13 November 1906. Here he mentions Ferrero's "book *Young Europe* which I have just read" (*Letters II* 190) and refers to some of the subjects in that book (anti-Semitism, Georg Brandes, etc.),[11] most of them from the last fifty or sixty pages (whereas the sections that helped him with "Two Gallants" and "A Little Cloud" are in the first half). Joyce must have taken Ferrero's book with him to Rome for the careful reading he was unable to give it in Trieste, where he had consulted a few "chapters" between bouts of composition. This would explain his having "just read" it in Rome, a phrase which Susan L. Humphreys takes as proof that some other work by Ferrero gave Joyce "Two Gallants."[12]

If *L'Europa giovane* helped with the thirteenth and fourteenth stories of *Dubliners*, did it also influence "The Dead," which Joyce probably conceived over the holidays of 1906-07? (He referred to Ferrero's book as late as 7 December 1906 [*Letters II* 201], and it was still on his mind on 11 February 1907 [*Letters II* 212].) There are numerous passages in *L'Europa giovane* that share the panoramic pessimism and lyrical intensity of the "little cloud" peroration. For example, discussing the Jewish intellectual's penchant for making

affirmations "of absolute truth and morality," Ferrero says:

> Human reason is still too weak to be able to affirm anything absolutely; it gropes amid the untrustworthy twilight of a dawn that has barely begun, while shadows, which it takes for solid bodies, frequently pass before it and then vanish. Suddenly, a proud race cries out in the half-light that it sees the sun of truth shining in noonday splendor, illuminating for its eyes all of nature and life, revealing to it eternal forms in images as precise as the forms of mountains seen from a plain below, through an atmosphere of total clarity. What a difference from the Aryan intelligence, which has so thoroughly understood and exaggerated the duty of humility in the face of the infinite mystery that it has proclaimed the mystical formula of *ignorabimus* and created the theory of the absolutely unknowable, into whose shadowy realm human reason will never penetrate! (367-68)

Ignorabimus is a major *topos* in *L'Europa giovane*, as it is in *The Greatness and Decline of Rome*,[13] which Joyce looked at in late 1906 (*Letters II* 191). In both works Ferrero stresses man's smallness and weakness in the big scheme of things, his inevitably limited efforts to make a mark on history and society. If man does succeed in effecting change, claims Ferrero, this is largely the result of contributions of which he is unaware, contributions which become known, if at all, in historical hindsight.

The "little cloud" passage and the one just cited are conclusions to sections on socialism and Jewish proselytism (respectively), and are rhetorically calculated to project a mood of pragmatic resignation after zealous striving in the service of some impracticable idea. This pattern of all too human ambition followed by a wise submission to things as they are is the basic movement of "The Dead": Gabriel's self-conscious efforts to control social and marital realities giving way finally to "his journey westward" (*D* 223). The nearly elegiac mood throughout much of *L'Europa giovane* (the book is typically *fin de siècle*) is in part due to the overarching theme in the work of Europe's journey northward: the power and wealth once enjoyed by the Latin countries have passed, Ferrero claims, to Northern Europe.

The mood of resignation in *L'Europa giovane* receives its clearest and most intense expression in the long meditation (fifteen pages) on the Russian attitude towards death: "Russian religiosity," says Ferrero, "is not born of a superstitious terror of death: on the contrary, a most distinctive trait of many Russians seems actually to be the capacity to consider death tranquilly" (265). He elaborates on this form of "euthanasia" (as he calls it) for several pages, developing the hypothesis that spiritual resignation to the reality of death

prepares one for a beneficial acceptance of misfortune in life as well. And he continues:

> The tiny formal distinctions of good and evil, which we apply to our social life, cannot be used to judge the total process of life, because [our social life] concerns itself with frail concepts which are almost always created to satisfy the transitory needs of a small social organization, while the process of life is eternal and infinite. (278-79)

"The Dead" is all about the inadequacy of social institutions (convivial, familial, marital) and the distinctions they create and enforce (marital/premarital; mine/yours; right/wrong; dead/living), whereas the total process of life is unconcerned with such matters.

Having offered a cosmic perspective on the social, Ferrero proposes to reassess the individual in the same terms, and his sketch of a proper sense of self is very like Gabriel's drift towards personal extinction:

> If true wisdom consists in knowing what one does not know, then ignorance commands the duty of resignation, which is a form of humility; it commands the voluntary abandonment of the self to this unknown play of forces which is life, which carries the human atoms no one knows where, and in whose power an individual is nothing more than a tiny grain of dust transported by an immense gust of wind. (279)

Gabriel becomes such a grain of dust: "His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world" (*D* 223), a world, that is, whose hard-edged actuality recovers some of its uncertain potentiality and strangeness once Gabriel lets go of the socially conditioned and experiences, however temporarily, a realm of "ideal sociality beyond material divisiveness."[14] The final image in Ferrero's passage – of "a tiny grain of dust transported by an immense gust of wind" – is one we have seen before. It is a version (one of several versions in *L'Europa giovane*) of the "little cloud" image, which a full year before he wrote "The Dead" Joyce prefixed to his fourteenth story, one page of which gave him more pleasure than all his verses (*Letters II* 182).

Having reached the point where he could see the ultimate insignificance and fecklessness of any one life in the face of the whole of life, it was but one step for Joyce – though he would be fifteen years taking it – to the comic vision of *Finnegans Wake*, in which human atoms are blown every which way. What began in meditations on death would end in Finnegan's up-rising, which is one way of going to a "funferall." In a letter (in Italian) to Giorgio in 1935, Joyce said, "My eyes are tired. For over half a century, they have gazed into nullity [*nel nulla*] where they have found a lovely nothing [*un bell-*

issimo niente]" (*Letters III* 359, 361). Ferrero's thoughts on death, from the same paragraph as the previous passage, run on similar lines in similar language:

> Until man becomes ignorant in this way [i.e., in order to achieve humility], the highest wisdom will be to regard himself as nothing [*di sentirsi esser niente*] in the face of this blind immensity of forces; will be "a glorious nothing" [*nichilo glorioso*], to use the bizarre phrase of our fourteenth-century mystics, in which, still straining to the utmost his active energies of thought and action, he resigns himself to admitting that before the infinity of things his greatest effort is equal to nought [*può equivalere a nulla*]. (279)

This is Gabriel Conroy at the start of his journey westward, a nullity among lovely nothings. It is also Little Chandler, who "felt how useless it was to struggle against fortune, this being the burden of wisdom which the ages had bequeathed to him" (*D* 71). But Ferrero's eloquent nihilism is applicable to other respectable nonentities, like Leopold Bloom and H.C. Earwicker.

Joyce must have been unusually receptive to counsels of resignation during the final months of his Rome sojourn. Plagued by a tedious job in a city he disliked, frustrated by Nora's unhappiness and his failure to reach an understanding with Richards, he must have felt his own identity fading out at times. He wrote to Stanislaus just before leaving Rome:

> It is months since I have written a line and even reading tires me. The interest I took in socialism and the rest has left me. I have gradually slid down until I have ceased to take any interest in any subject.... I have no wish to codify myself as anarchist or socialist or reactionary. (*Letters II* 217)

But Joyce's predicament, like Gabriel's, which also involves a certain uncodification of the self, had its compensations: "Yet," he said in the same letter, "I have certain ideas I would like to give form to: not as a doctrine but as the continuation of the expression of myself which I now see I began in *Chamber Music*." Though uncodified, the self could still be expressed. The next non-doctrinal, self-expressive idea he would give form to would be "The Dead."

NOTES

[1] There have been three efforts to assess the influence of Ferrero's *L'Europa giovane* on Joyce's fiction. In *A Scrupulous Meanness: A Study of Joyce's Early Work* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 95-98, Edward Brandabur gave an extensive reading of "Two Gallants" in terms of Ferrero's remarks about Germanic and Latin traits, Bismarck's militarism, and the brutality of Berlin's prostitution. A decade or so later,

Dominic Manganiello and Susan L. Humphreys, working independently of each other, combed Ferrero's book for material Joyce may have used and made some important discoveries, especially in connection with *Ulysses*. But they disagreed totally on one matter. While Manganiello followed Brandabur in seeing *L'Europa giovane* as the inspiration for "Two Gallants," Humphreys insisted that there was no evidence for such a conclusion, that Joyce did not mention Ferrero's book specifically until months after the story was finished, and that, in any case, Ferrero's *Il Militarismo*, which Joyce never referred to, "now seems the most likely candidate." Nevertheless, the evidence points to *L'Europa giovane* as the book Joyce was reading in late 1905 or early 1906. See Dominic Manganiello, *Joyce's Politics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 46-57; and Susan L. Humphreys, "Ferrero Etc: James Joyce's Debt to Guglielmo Ferrero," *JJQ*, 16 (Spring 1979), 239-51.

[2] David Weir, "'A Little Cloud': New Light on the Title," *JJQ*, 17 (Spring 1980), 301-02. My locating the source for Joyce's title does not supersede this ingenious verbal analysis based on a possible "Celtic pun."

[3] Guglielmo Ferrero, *L'Europa giovane: Studi e Viaggi nei Paesi del Nord* (1897; rpt. Cernusco sul Naviglio: Garzanti, 1946), p. 114, my translation; no English translation of this work has appeared. I would like to thank Joseph P. Consoli, Reference Librarian of Firestone Library, Princeton University, for his help with my translations. Further references to this work are cited parenthetically in the text.

[4] A few pages earlier, summarizing his remarks about the ineffective idealism of the German socialists, Ferrero uses a slightly different cloud image:

> The cloud that rises and broadens into grandiose scrolls and is stretched against the azure background of the sky in colossal and bizarre designs, is marvelous to look at; but a physicist could imagine how, concentrated, that vapor might propel many things. (106)

Not least among Ferrero's gifts is his considerable rhetorical dexterity. Metaphors abound in his works, and he delights in carefully calculated stylistic effects, like this building up of cloud images to suggest inefficacy—a trick that obviously pleased Joyce.

[5] Gallaher "summarised the vices of many capitals and seemed inclined to award the palm to Berlin" (*D* 78). Ferrero makes an identical judgment: "No city . . . is such a brutal den of prostitution as Berlin" (165). The discussion of sexual brutality that follows provided Joyce with the moral code of his two gallants.

[6] Joyce's extensive final revision of "The Sisters," which almost certainly overlapped with his work on "A Little Cloud," shows his preoccupation with the image of the little cloud and with Ferrero's ideas. In the description of Father Flynn taking snuff, Joyce worked in the metaphor of "little clouds of smoke"—in "A Little Cloud," Gallaher emerges from "clouds of smoke" (*D* 78)—releasing "constant showers of snuff which gave his ancient priestly garments their green faded look" (*D* 12). This metaphor is subtly linked to the metonymic "red handkerchief" which is like the priest in being "quite inefficacious." Through the careful deployment of metaphor and nuance, Joyce achieved here a compression of Ferrero's "little cloud" passage and its basic point: that man's efforts are dwarfed by reality and perhaps ultimately baffled by it, especially when he overreaches, and Father Flynn was "too scrupulous always" (*D* 17).

[7] In the "little cloud" passage, Ferrero refers to the accidental discovery of "fields of gold dust" [*i campi della polvere d'oro*] in California (114).

[8] Humphreys' choice of *Il Militarismo* as the "most likely candidate," despite the

fact that Joyce never mentioned it, is based on her judgment that that work contains a greater number of details that might have helped Joyce (Humphreys, 242–45), though her evidence seems to me tenuous.

[9] Stanislaus Joyce, "The Background to 'Dubliners,'" *The Listener*, 51 (25 March 1954), 527.

[10] Joyce's sudden interest in Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, mentioned in his 16 August 1906 letter from Rome (*Letters II* 149-50), may have been prompted by Ferrero's observations in this section.

[11] See Manganiello, pp. 52-53, and Humphreys, 246-50.

[12] Humphreys, 243.

[13] Cf. the "Preface to the First Edition":

> Human history, like all other phenomena of life and motion, is the unconscious product of an infinity of small unnoticed efforts. Its work is done, spasmodically and in disorder, by single individuals or groups of individuals, acting generally from immediate motives, with results which always transcend the knowledge and intentions of contemporaries, and are but seldom revealed, darkly and for a moment, to succeeding generations.

Guglielmo Ferrero, *The Greatness and Decline of Rome*, trans. Alfred E. Zimmern (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, n.d.), I, *The Empire-Builders*, p. vii.

[14] I refer to Kenneth Burke's brilliant analysis of "The Dead," reprinted from *Perspectives by Incongruity* in *"Dubliners": Text, Criticism, and Notes*, ed. Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz (New York: Viking Press, 1969), pp. 410-16.